

1

The first Mila was a dog. A Bedlington terrier. It helps if you know these things. I'm not at all resentful at being named after a dog. In fact, I can imagine the scene exactly. *Mila*, my father would have said, that's a nice name. Forgetting where he'd heard it. And then my mother would remember the dog and ask if he was absolutely sure, and when he didn't answer, she would say, OK, then. Mila. And then looking at me think, Mila, my Mila.

I don't believe in reincarnation. It seems unlikely that I've inherited the soul of my grandfather's long-dead dog. But certain traits make me wonder. Was it entirely coincidence that Mila entered my father's head on the morning of my birth? Observing his daughter, one minute old, he thought first of the dog, Mila? Why?

My father and I are preparing for a journey to New York, to visit his oldest friend. But yesterday things changed. His friend's wife phoned to say he'd left home.

Left home? Gil asks. What on earth do you mean?

Disappeared, she says. No note. Nothing.

Gil looks confused. Nothing?

You'll still come? says the wife.

I

And when Gil is silent for a moment, thinking it through, she says, Please.

Yes, of course, Gil says, and slowly replaces the phone in its cradle.

He'll be back, Gil tells Marieka. He's just gone off by himself to think for a while. You know what he's like.

But why now? My mother is puzzled. When he knew you were coming? The timing is . . . peculiar.

Gil shrugs. By this time tomorrow he'll be back. I'm certain he will.

Marieka makes a doubtful noise but from where I'm crouched I can't see her face. What about Mila? she says.

A few things I know: It is Easter holiday and I am out of school. My mother is working all week in Holland and I cannot stay at home alone. My father lives inside his head and it is better for him to have company when he travels, to keep him on track. The tickets were bought two months ago.

We will both still go.

I enjoy my father's company and we make a good pair. Like my namesake, Mila the dog, I have a keen awareness of where I am and what I'm doing at all times. I am not given to dreaminess, have something of a terrier's determination. If there is something to notice, I will notice it first.

I am good at solving puzzles.

My packing is nearly finished when Marieka comes to say that she and Gil have decided I should still go. I am already arranging clues in my head, thinking through the possibilities, looking for a theory.

I have met my father's friend sometime in the distant past but I don't remember him. He is a legend in our family for

once saving Gil's life. Without Matthew there would be no me. For this, I would like to thank him, though I never really get the chance.

It seems so long ago that we left London. Back then I was a child.

I am still, technically speaking, a child.

2

I know very little about Mila the dog. She belonged to my grandfather when he was a boy growing up in Lancashire and dogs like Mila were kept for ratting not pets. I found a dusty old photo of her in an album my father kept from childhood. Mostly it contains pictures of people I don't know. In the photo, the dog has a crouchy stance, as if she'd rather be running flat out. The person on the other side of the camera interests me greatly. Perhaps it is my grandfather, a boy who took enough pride in his ratting dog to keep a photo of her. Lots of people take pictures of their dogs now, but did they then? The dog is looking straight ahead. If it were his dog, wouldn't it turn to look?

This picture fills me with a deep sense of longing. *Suadade*, Gil would say. Portuguese. The longing for something loved and lost, something gone or unattainable.

I cannot explain the feeling of sadness I have looking at this picture. Mila the dog has been dead for eighty years.

Everyone calls my father Gil. Gil's childhood friend has walked out of the house he shared with his wife and baby. No one knows where he went or why. Matthew's wife

phoned Gil, in case he wanted to change our plans. In case he'd heard something.

He hadn't. Not then.

We will take the train to the airport and it is important to remember our passports. Marieka tells me to take good care of myself and kisses me. She smiles and asks if I will be OK and I nod, because I will. She looks in Gil's direction and says, Take care of your father. She knows I will take care of him as best I can. Age is not always the best judge of competence.

The train doors close and we wave goodbye. I settle down against my father and breathe the smell of his jacket. He smells of books, ink, old coffee pushed to the back of the desk and wool, plus a hint of the cologne Marieka used to buy him; one he hasn't worn in years. The smell of his skin is too familiar to describe. It surprised me to discover that not everyone can identify people by their smell. Marieka says this makes me half dog at least.

I've seen the way dogs sniff people and other dogs on the street or when they return from another place. They want to put a picture together based on clues: Where have you been? Were there cats there? Did you eat meat? So. A wood fire. Mud. Lemons.

If I were a dog and smelled books, coffee and ink in a slightly tweedy wool jacket, I don't know whether I'd think, *That man translates books*. But that is what he does.

I've always wondered why humans developed so many languages. It complicates things. *Makes things interesting*, says Gil.

Today, we are going to America, where we won't need any extra languages. Gil ruffles my hair but doesn't actually notice that I'm sitting beside him. He is deep in a book translated by a colleague. Occasionally he nods.

My mother plays the violin in an orchestra. Scrape scrape scrape, she says when it's time to practise, and closes the door. Tomorrow she will set off to Holland.

I narrow my eyes and focus on a point in the distance. I am subtle, quick and loyal. I would have made a good ratter.

Suadade. I wonder if Gil is feeling that now for his lost friend. If he is, he is not showing any sign of it.

3

Marieka is from Sweden. Gil's mother was Portuguese-French. I need diagrams to keep track of all the nationalities in my family but I don't mind. Mongrels are wily and healthy and don't suffer displaced hips or premature madness.

My parents were over forty when they had me but I don't think of them as old, any more than they think of me as young. We are just us.

The fact that Gil's friend left home exactly when we were coming to visit is hard to understand. The police don't believe he's been murdered or kidnapped. I can imagine Gil wandering out the door and forgetting for a while to come back, but ties to Marieka and me would draw him home. Perhaps Matthew's ties are looser.

Despite being best friends, Gil and Matthew haven't seen each other in eight years. This makes the timing of his disappearance quite strange. Impolite, at the very least.

I look forward to seeing his wife and starting to understand what happened. Perhaps that's why Gil decided to take me along. Did I mention that I'm good at puzzles?

There is no need to double-check the passports; they are zipped into the inner pocket of my bag, safe, ready to be

presented at check-in. Gil has put his book down and is gazing at something inside his head.

Where do you think Matthew went? I ask him.

It takes him a few seconds to return to me. He sighs and places his hand on my knee. I don't know, sweetheart.

Do you think we'll find him?

He looks thoughtful and says, Matthew was a wanderer, even as a child.

I wait to hear what he says next about his friend, but he says nothing. Inside his head he is still talking. Whole sentences flash across his eyes. I can't read them.

What? I say.

What, what? But he smiles.

What are you thinking?

Nothing important. About my childhood. I knew Matthew as well as I knew myself. When I think of him he still looks like a boy, even though he's quite old.

He's the same age as you I say, a little huffily.

Yes. He laughs, and pulls me close.

Here is the story from Gil's past:

He and Matthew are twenty-two, hitch-hiking to France in the back of a lorry with hardly any money. Then across France to Switzerland, to climb the Lauteraarhorn. Of the two, Matthew is the serious climber. It all goes according to plan until, on the second day, the temperature begins to rise. Avalanche weather. They watch the snow and ice thunder down around them. Mist descends towards evening, wrapping the mountain like a cloak. They burrow in, hoping the weather will change. Around midnight, the wind picks up and the rain turns to snow.

I've tried to imagine the scene hundreds of times. The first problem – exposure; the second – altitude. In the dead of night, in the dark and cold and wind and snow, Matthew notices the first signs of sickness in his friend and insists they descend. Gil refuses. Time passes. Head pounding, dizzy and irrational, Gil shouts, pushes Matthew off him. When at last he slumps, exhausted by the effort and the thin air, all he wants is to sit down and sleep in the snow. To die.

Over the next eleven hours, Matthew cajoles and drags and walks and talks him down the mountain. Over and over he tells Gil that you don't lie down in the snow. You keep going, no matter what.

They reach safety and Gil swears never to climb again.

And Matthew?

He was in love with it, says Gil.

He saved your life.

Gil nods.

We both fall silent, and I think, *and yet*.

And yet. Gil's life would not have needed saving if it hadn't been for Matthew.

The risk-taker and his riskee.

When I think of the way this trip has turned out, I wonder if we've been summoned for some sort of cosmic levelling, to help Matthew this time, the one who has never before required saving.

Perhaps we have been called in to balance the flow of energy in the universe.

We reach the airport. Gil picks up my bag and his, and we heave ourselves off the train. As the escalator carries us up, a text pings on to his phone.

My father is no good at texts, so he hands it to me and I show him: **Still nothing** it says, and is signed **Suzanne**. Matthew's wife.

We look at each other.

Come on, he says, piling our bags on to a trolley, and off we trot for what feels like miles to the terminal. At the check-in I ask for a window seat. Gil isn't fussy. We answer the questions about bombs and sharp objects, rummage through our carry-on bags for liquids, take our boarding passes and join the long snake through international departures. I pass the time watching other people, guessing their nationalities and relationships. American faces, I note, look unguarded. Does this make them more, or less approachable? I don't know yet.

Gil buys a newspaper and a bottle of whisky from duty-free and we go to the gate. As we board the plane I'm still thinking about that night on the mountain. What does it take to half drag, half carry a disorientated man the size of Gil, hour after hour, through freezing snow and darkness?

He may have other faults, this friend of Gil's, but he is not short of determination.

4

Suzanne meets us at international arrivals in New York. We are tired and crumpled. She spots Gil while he is trying to get his phone to work, and I nudge him and point. She's not old but looks pinched, as if someone's forgotten to water her. There is a buggy beside her and in it a child sleeps, despite all the bustle and noise. His arms stick out sideways in his padded suit. He wears a blue striped hat.

Gil kisses her and says, It's been too long. He peers down at the child. Hello, he says.

This is Gabriel, says Suzanne.

Hello, Gabriel, Gil says.

Gabriel squeezes his eyes together but doesn't wake up.

And, Mila, says Suzanne. You've changed so much.

She means that I've changed since I was four years old, when we last came to visit. That's when I met Gabriel's older brother, Owen. He was seven and I don't remember much about him, though we are holding hands in the one photo Gil has of us.

I touch the side of my finger to Gabriel's fist and he opens it and grabs on to me, still asleep. His grip is strong.

I'm sorry it's turned out like this, she says, and shakes her

head. Not much fun for you. She turns to Gil. Come on. We can talk in the car.

The car is noisy and they speak in low voices so I can't catch most of what they're saying. Gabriel's in the back with me, fast asleep in his car seat. Occasionally he opens his eyes or stretches out a hand or kicks his feet, but he doesn't wake up. I make him grab on to my finger again and hear Suzanne say, Well, I hope you've made the right decision. She says it in a way that suggests he hasn't made the right decision at all, and I'm sure she's talking about bringing me along.

It has started to rain.

I fall asleep in the car to the rhythmic whoosh of wind-screen wipers and the low buzz of Gil and Suzanne talking. Normally I'd be tuning in to hear what they're saying, but I'm too tired to care. Gabriel still hangs on to my finger.

When I awake it's dark. The road is narrow and quiet, nearly deserted; the rain has stopped. I say nothing at all, just look out of the window at the woods hoping to see a deer or a bear peering at me. Gil and Suzanne have stopped talking and the car is filled with private thoughts. Suzanne's are surprisingly clear; Gil's muffled and soft. Gil will be thinking about Matthew. It's a puzzle in his head and Suzanne's and mine. Where has Matthew gone? And why?

Suzanne's thoughts sound like a CD skipping. *Damn damn damn damn damn*.

What I know already is that Matthew and Suzanne both teach at the university in town. Matthew disappeared five days ago, eight months into the academic year, fourteen months after Gabriel was born. He took nothing with him, not a change of clothing or a passport or any money. Just

left for work in the morning, said goodbye as usual and never showed up to teach his class.

The actual running away does not strike me as particularly strange. Most of us are held in place by a kind of centrifugal force. If for some reason the force stopped, we might all fly off in different directions. But what about the not coming back? Staying away is frightening and painful. And who would leave a baby? Even to me this seems extreme, a failure of love.

I think hard. What would make it feel like the only thing to do?

Here are the things I come up with:

- (A) Desperation (about what?)
- (B) Fear (of what?)
- (C) Anger (why?)

I know hardly anything about Matthew and Suzanne. I will try to find out what is what when we arrive. There are always answers. Sometimes the right answer turns out to be

- (D) All of the above.